

PUBLIC INFORMATION STATEMENT  
NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE RALEIGH NC  
700 AM EDT FRI JUN 27 2008

## THE FACTS ABOUT LIGHTNING STRIKE VICTIMS

In the United States, each year, lightning kills an average of 73 people and injures more than 300 people based on documented cases. While any death is tragic and devastating to the family, injuries can be equally tragic and even more devastating to the family. For those who have a relative that suffers a significant disability from lightning, life changes forever. In addition to the physical pain and mental anguish suffered by the victim and the victim's family, the incident may lead to a loss of income for the family. Over time, medical expenses for treatment may drain the family's assets.

If someone is struck by lightning, it's important that they receive the appropriate medical attention immediately. Some deaths can be prevented if the victims are attended to promptly. Lightning victims do not carry an electrical charge and are safe to handle. First, have someone call 9-1-1 or your local ambulance service. Check to see that the victim is breathing and has a pulse, and continue to monitor the victim until help arrives. Cardiac arrest is the immediate cause of death in lightning fatalities. If necessary, begin cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR). Also, if possible, move the victim to a safer place. Don't let the rescuers become lightning victims. Lightning can strike the same place twice.

Physically, only few lightning strike victims actually suffer burns. Due to the conductivity of the human body, lightning burns are usually minor, and most lightning burns are caused when objects next to the body (such as necklaces, rings, or metal coins) are heated by the lightning. In addition, sweat, vaporized by lightning, can also cause burns.

Mentally, lightning strike victims may face many challenges that they'll have to live with for the rest of their lives. When the brain is affected by a lightning strike, the person often has difficulty with many of the mental processes that most people take for granted. The person may suffer from short-term memory loss, and may have difficulty mentally storing new information and accessing old information. Victims may often find it very difficult to carry on more than one task at a time, and may be easily distracted. Their personality may change and they may become easily irritated.

Victims often complain of becoming easily fatigued and may become exhausted after only a few hours work. This may be because mental tasks that were once automatic may now require intense concentration to accomplish. Although some victims may sleep excessively at first, after a few weeks, many find it difficult to sleep more than two or three hours at a time.

Another common long-term problem for survivors is pain. Medically, pain is difficult to

quantify. Lightning strike victims often suffer irreparable nerve damage from which they will suffer for the rest of their lives. The pain can be so intense that it affects the person's ability to function. Many survivors complain of chronic headaches, some of which are very intense and debilitating.

It is important to remember that, while many lightning victims survive, their lives are changed forever, and their dreams for the future and those of their family will never be the same.

#### QUESTION OF THE DAY: WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE STRUCK BY LIGHTNING?

ANSWER: Here is the Todd's story, just one of many people in this country who have been struck by lightning, survived, and are now living with the devastating, life-long effects that lightning can inflict on a person's life.

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#### Todd's Story

On Thursday, July 11, 1991, Todd was home, inside his garage, repairing the exhaust system of his car. Although Todd was unaware of it at the time, the cirrus anvil of a distant storm was starting to spread overhead and a dangerous electrical potential was developing between the positively-charged anvil cloud and the negatively charged ground. To Todd, the sky appeared to be partly cloudy with no apparent indication of the storm. Suddenly, lightning struck nearby, traveled in and along the ground, and through the garage floor. Todd was hit as he installed the muffler on the car. The rain from the storm didn't arrive for an estimated 20 to 30 minutes after the lightning strike. Todd suffered burns on the right side of his body and in his throat, and had tremors in his left side immediately after the strike. Fortunately, Todd remained conscious and was able to call for help.

Todd's outward appearance, however, does not begin to show the debilitating injuries that he has suffered, and continues to suffer from the lightning strike. Like many lightning victims, Todd suffered irreversible nerve damage and has lived in constant pain for the past 10 years. Despite 15 operations and numerous consultations with specialists, Todd's severe pain continues. He is unable to work, and on some days, he is unable to function due to excruciating pain. Since the incident, Todd also suffers from short-term memory loss. He was 24 years old at the time of the incident.

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For more survivor stories, visit NOAA's Lightning Safety Awareness web site at:

<http://www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov>